

Drawing Closer
Mark 9:30-37

Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, GMP/CEO
First Congregational Church UCC - Columbus, OH
22 September 2024

Good morning First Congregational Church. It is my pleasure to be present with you this morning. I bring you greetings from the National Ministries of the United Church of Christ and from the staff and leadership of the United Church of Christ Board. We are grateful for you, for your ministries here in Columbus and for the ways you support justice in the world. I want to thank you for your years of financial support to the Heartland Conference and the National Ministers through the special mission offerings of the church including Our Churches Wider Mission, One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need and the Christmas Offering. Our vision for a just world for all cannot be accomplished by any one of us; instead, our collective witness contributes to changing lives and changing the world.

It is good to be present with you here at First Congregational Church this morning as you move through this season of celebration, thanksgiving, and new beginnings. Congratulations to Rev. Dr. Ahrens as he concludes his ministry and retires after 25 years of leadership here with you and in Columbus. And, as you celebrate the 172nd anniversary of this church, there is a history of social engagement to be celebrated. Thank you for your presence on behalf of many. Thank you for your witness in the community. Thank you for being a safe place where God's love is experienced, and the good news of the gospel is lived in fullness. While you have a lot to celebrate and can point to a legacy of community involvement, this time of celebration is not an end: it is a time of new vision and new beginning.

Let us pray...

As I often do, I want to start today's sermon with a poem.

broken sidewalks

by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

we, inhabitants of time and space
children of lesser gods
brothers and sisters of light
relatives
of saints and sinners

we, wounded travelers
building magical moving staircases
to fantastical dreams
traumatized healers
mending breaches and fissures

then as now
we rise
then as now
we hear the drum beats of tomorrow

then as now
we chart a future
singing songs

without a score

then is now

we, the transcendent
children of the earth
babies formed from tears
visionaries writing
on the clouds

we, the mystery of life
living as seeds fallen into the cracks
of broken sidewalks
finding soil
pushing deep shattering concrete

then as now
we flourish
then as now
we hold tight to each other

then as now
we chant incantations
weaving strength and hope
into broadcloth of justice

without looms

we, waters flowing free
children of breath
bearers of courage
luminaries of change
marching across broken sidewalks

we, creators of tranquility
children of radiant brilliance
defying obstacles
sidesteppers of defeat
building pathways to our destiny

then as now
we transmogrify
then as now
we swim rivers to generational healing

then as now
we dream afloat
riding flotsam
rearranging shards of broken sidewalks

into sweeping mosaics of freedom

KGAT
19:52
Washington, DC
3 April 2018

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We are living through particularly challenging times, which call us to respond to what we see around us. There are local and global challenges, social ills and dis-ease which command our attention and demand that we respond with compassion and care to those around us. A reasonable response is not always easy. A balanced response means we not only think about what we want to do and how we want to respond; we are also invited to meet the needs of those around us where they are. It is easy to project what we think or how we believe others should exist in this world. Our desires ought not to border on judgement, but ought to emerge from a place of compassion.

The world continues to change around us. The inevitability of change is a truth we try to avoid, desiring instead to cling to the certainties we know. Change can be good, the transformation we seek in body, mind and spirit, the embrace of change that signals better in our world is always welcome. That is not always the case. We live in a world where people do not respond with love as they should. We are witnesses to phobias which are based on hatred and distrust of those who do not look like us, think like us, or subscribe to the same beliefs we do.

Here in the United States, we find ourselves tiptoeing through another election cycle where vitriolic language and behavior is on display. What do we have to say into the uncivil discourse that is present among us? How do we hold true to our morals and values while respecting the rights of all people? Challenges are all around us as we account for those living on our streets unable to feed themselves and their families. Here in Columbus, the homeless population is on the rise as it is in many of our cities. As schools re-open for another year, many of our children will go to school hungry. Our schools face economic challenges that prevent teachers from having the materials and supplies they need to educate their students. What does this mean for the next generation?

And in all of this, there is the church of this age. Followers of Jesus Christ who are at odds with each other in presenting a God of love and a Jesus of justice. This is not the first time in history we have seen the church divided. The visionaries who founded this church did so as supporters of the abolitionist movement. This church was the locus for the formation of the social justice movement which was needed then and is alive and well among us. In the words of Sweet Honey in the Rock: We who believe in freedom cannot rest/We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.

In Mark's gospel reading this morning, Jesus asked his disciples what they were arguing about as they travelled from Galilee to Capernaum. Here in chapter 9, we experience the fullness of Jesus' ministry and the wonder of the disciples as they witnessed his interactions with the people. What could they have been arguing about in the midst of this time of transformation of people's lives and the community in which they lived?

At the beginning of the chapter, they were with Jesus when he went up the mountain and was transfigured before them. Jesus is revealed to them in a new way as Moses and Elijah appear

on the mountain with Jesus. Peter's desire is stay there on the mountain, to build three shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The text says: "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified" (Mark 9:6). Jesus was teaching them in a new way, interpreting for them the teachings of the scribes for the time they were living in. He was healing the sick. Mark 9:14-29 tells the story of Jesus healing the boy with a spirit.

In that passage, Jesus asks a similar question of the disciples who are arguing with the scribes and a gathering crowd. "What are you arguing about with them?" (Mark 9:16). In this case, the man stepped forward and indicated he brought his son to the disciples for healing. According to the man's account: "I asked your disciples to cast it, but they could not do so" (Mark 9:18). Their failure to respond to the need of the child produced the argument they were in with the crowd and the scribes. Jesus heals the boy.

It is after all these events that they move on and Jesus asks them the question. They were arguing about who was the greatest among them. After all they had witnessed, their egos needed to be fed with the simplicity of perceived greatness. All they did was not centered in the ego, they missed the opportunity in the moment. Rather than drawing closer to the Divine, they thought their ability to heal was coming from themselves. Rather than drawing closer to God and being filled with the Spirit, they were transacting their positional power with Jesus. Rather than drawing closer to the Divine, they allowed their egos to overshadow the work of the Spirit among them.

As I travel, I hear the conversations about the church. What is the church doing? Is the church relevant in these days? What is the message the church has to bring? What does the numerical decline facing many congregations mean for the future of the church? In the midst of it all, we have turned inward, looking at ourselves and wondering who is the greatest among us. And yet, that is not our task. Like the disciples, the focus on ourselves and what we think we can do is problematic to our ability to be responsive to the needs of others. Their inability to heal the man's son was a by-product of this misguided, competitive attitude which caused them to experience the manifestation of God working in them, among them and through them as a sign of their own greatness.

Church, we are here for a purpose. We are here, present as witnesses to God at work in the world. We are a part of the vision, invited to be agents of social change. Each one of us brings gifts and skills, a vision for mission and ministry that allows us to do the work of justice. The prophet Micah said:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly. The walking humbly part was missed by the disciples in that moment. Jesus' lesson to them is about humility. He said to them: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). This is a formula for walking humbly. Jesus applies simplicity to helping them understand what they needed to be responsive to the needs of those who were sick and brokenhearted.

Our humility is needed for this moment, a humility that draws us closer to God for the living of these days. We cannot be responsive to the emerging needs in the community and in the world if we are not centered in God and connected to the power of the Spirit. Ministry and mission

require a vision that is beyond us. The history of First Congregational is replete with the stories of people who loved God, embraced risk, and accomplished far more than even they thought possible. These Ancestors understood the promise of the Spirit. They lived Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit as a daily part of their lives and not an annual event.

We can draw closer to God. Our commitments to spiritual practices, to living God revealed, moves us beyond the shallowness of believing we can do by ourselves in the church. We can do more. We can be more deeply spiritually connected as we let go of self and allow the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us in the days to come.

Then as now, we have the opportunity to be living witnesses to the healing power of Jesus revealed among us. There is more for us to do. Let's draw closer and stop the arguments about trivialities. Let us draw closer and witness the freshness of the Spirit among us. Let us draw closer and see God at work in this day, in the church, every day of the week. It is time for us to draw closer and be the prophets and healers of this age. May it be so.

lessons

we come into this world
ready

we come knowing
we come with purpose
we are
ready

knowing is of the self
knowledge of our power
awareness of the wisdom
traveling with us
instinct aligning our journey

purpose is present
the peace that we are
we are courageous
we are open
we are a part of the Universe

we encounter a world
unaccepting
our opinions grate
our certainty wavers
we lose purpose

we hide our gifts
the pain of living
like water flowing changing rock
wears us down
tearing us at the core

we are ready

our aches and pains
a sign of restlessness
calling us back
to brilliance

the weariness in our spirits
a reminder
purpose awaits
pulling at our center
willing us to remember

we came
into this world ready
we are enough
we are brilliant
we are ready

3 December 2020
7:16
KGAT
Olmsted Township, OH

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